



**Cultural Security of Indian
Muslims: Sir Syed Ahmed
Khan and His Legacy**

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Abstract

In the middle of Nineteenth century, the Indian Muslims confronted with the crucial problems of the devastation of the long 800 years of Mughal Dynasty/ Muslim's rule and concomitant colonial expansion of the British in India. The failure of the Revolt of 1857/ Mutiny/ First War of Independence exacerbated plight of the Indian Muslims. In post-1857 India, several forces- both external as well as internal - were working against the Muslims in India. The Britishers' retaliatory havoc in post-1857, colonial domination in the transformed historical situation and the darkness of ignorance engulfed the Indian Muslims. The condition of Muslims was deplorable as they were most backward in education and economically shattered and politically defeated by the East India Company. The entire community was distressed and helpless, and their culture, identity and existence were at stake in Hindustan. At that critical juncture, Sir Syed Ahmed Khan (1817-1898), confronting the situation and negotiating with colonial modernity, came forward with western modern science and English education in one hand and the light of the Quran on the other hand to offer a solution to the Muslim community from this decadence. Syed Ahmed was a distinguished scholar, philosopher, historian, Islamic reformer, educationist, political ideologue, archaeologist, lawyer and a humanist who transformed socio-political, cultural situation of Muslims in post- 1857 India. He was primarily concerned about the socio-cultural issues and modern education of the Indian Muslims. With a view to modernizing and uplifting the socio-cultural and economic status of the Muslims, he laid the foundation of Muhammadan Anglo-Oriental College (1875), which was later transformed into Aligarh Muslim University (1920). Aligarh Muslim University has been serving as a socio-cultural Movement for protecting and preserving the cultural heritage and religious identity of the Indian Muslims.

Keywords: *Syed Ahmed Khan, Culture, Security, Indian Muslim, Aligarh Movement*

**“Yet Leaving Here A Name, I Trust,a
That Will Not Perish in the Dust”1...**

With such firm determination, Sir Syed Ahmed Khan (1817-1898), a social reformer started the epoch making Aligarh Movement for the restoration of the socio-cultural identity and regeneration of the Indian Muslims in British-India. In the second half of 19th century, the Indian Muslims confronted the crucial problems of the devastation of the long 800 years of Mughal Dynasty/ Muslim's rule and concomitant colonial expansion of the British in India. Several forces- both external as well as internal - were working against the Muslims in India at that time. The Britishers' retaliatory havoc in post-1857, Hindu domination and the darkness of ignorance engulfed the Indian Muslims. The condition of Muslims was deplorable as they were most backward in education and economically shattered and politically defeated by the East India Company, and were entirely hopeless. The entire community was distressed and helpless, and their culture, identity and existence were at stake in Hindustan. At that critical juncture, Sir Syed Ahmed Khan, confronting the situation and negotiating with colonial modernity, came forward with the light of Quran in one hand and western modern science and English education on the other hand to rescue the Muslim community from this decadence.

The natural curiosity comes up, who was Sir Syed Ahmed Khan and what prompted him to do such reformation? He was a distinguished scholar, philosopher, Islamic reformer, educationist, political ideologue, archaeologist, lawyer and a humanist who transformed socio-political, cultural and intellectual India after the failure of the First War of Independence (1857). He waged war against blind faith and religious dogma, and insisted on reason and logic. He was an Indian civil servant and a person of genius, that only at the age of 19 he was officially recognized to be a learned person in India. He was also well versed in Islamic studies/Religious/Quranic Studies as well as Modern scientific knowledge. He visited several Western as well as Eastern countries and therefore acquainted with many languages, cultures and civilizations. In addition to Urdu and English, he learned many languages like Arabic, French, Hebrew, Persian, and English. He visited Royal society of London and was deeply influenced by the 18th - 19th century England, considered to be an era of reason. He

was privileged with a vast library and his familiarity with the West provided him an access to the western philosophy and rare western journals/periodicals which equipped him with profound knowledge of Western philosophy, modern science and other scientific subjects. In his article “Man who Knew Tomorrow”, Professor Asim Siddiqui refers to the personality of Sir Syed Ahmed Khan as “a collective intellectual” (the term is coined by Pierre Bourdieu). He asserted his identity as Muslim not because of his religious inheritance from predecessors but he learned Islam and other religions.

The debacle of the Mughal Empire and the post-1857 aftermath led to the distressful condition of Muslims in British-India. Moreover, the Muslims were also considered to be the central enemy in 1857 wage against the Britishers. Voicing against the British was beyond imagination at that time, but Sir Syed dared to write back the cause of Indian revolt in his book *Asbab e Baghawat e Hind* to point out several provocations responsible for the revolt alongside defending the Muslims from the wrath of Britishers. In *Asbab e Baghawat e Hind* (The Causes of Indian Mutiny), he tries to defend the Muslims from the onslaught of the British Empire which considered Muslims as the main participants against the British in the war of 1857. In this writing, he brought to the surface several shortcomings of the British, several injustices and the aggressive accession policies adopted by the East India Company. He nullified the British accusation of the Muslim’s conspiracy in the revolt; rather he wrote that it was a spontaneous reaction against the faulty policies and wrong doings of the East India Company. Sir Syed argued:

The primary causes of rebellion are, I fancy, everywhere the same. It invariably results from the existence of a policy obnoxious to the dispositions, aims, habits, and views of those by whom the rebellion is brought about.,. As regards the Rebellion of 1857, the fact is, that for a long period many grievances had been rankling in the hearts of the people.... The manner in which the rebellion spread, first here, then there, now breaking out in this place and now in that, is alone good proof that there existed no widespread conspiracy.

(*Asbab e Baghawat e Hind*)

He further argued that “the Honourable East India Company had act-

ed in defiance of its treaties” and the man of all classes were irritated at its annexation of Oudh. He suggested several valuable recommendations for the British Government to follow in British-India. Instead of punishments for writing such daring pamphlets against the policy of Company, he received applaus in the British parliament for his daring treatise. Most of the English news papers endorsing Sir Syed’s views, advocated the British Government to act on the recommendations.

He realized that it was not possible to achieve social security of the Muslims without modern scientific education. He came up with the practical solution to the gloomy atmosphere of post- 1857 British-India to conduce the “promotion of English education and of refinement of manners and character-building among the Muslim gentry so that they could qualify for employment within the colonial bureaucracy, thereby keeping in check the perceived Muslim political and economic decline.” With a view to modernizing and uplifting the socio-cultural status of the Muslims in India, he founded The Mohammedan Anglo-Oriental College in 1875. On his way to England, Sir Syed dreamed of establishing a University of excellence like the Oxford and Cambridge and recorded in his travelogue. Sir Syed wanted to build the Mohammadan Anglo-Oriental College on the model of University of Cambridge. While vividly describing the University of Cambridge where his son Syed Mahmood was studying at that time, Sir Syed Ahmed Khan vividly expressed his dream in Musafiran e London, (Travelogue of Visiting England). :

After visiting the University of Cambridge, which is testament to the power of intellect, generosity, and hard work, I fervently desired that in my country, India, people would shed their backward-looking attitude, and that my country becomes the same beacon of greatness and glory, as England is in Western Europe.

(Musafiran e London)

With a vision to create a lot of thinking beings among the Muslim community, Sir Syed’s Aligarh Movement started with the establishment of scientific society, and the cumulative efforts resulted in the foundation of Mohammadan Anglo Oriental College in 1877, later became Aligarh Muslim University which is one of the most prestigious modern Muslim education institutes in South Asia. Sir Syed expressed his philosophy of education that “Philosophy will be in our right hand and natural science in our left. And the crown of, ‘There is no God but Allah’ will adorn our head.” Despite his proclivity towards modern science, he never ever compromised

with the high values of Islamic principles. He exhorted the Muslims to change their traditional religious outlook and discard their opposition to the western education system. Sir Syed himself explained the reason behind the foundation of The Mohammedan Anglo-Oriental College:

I shall feel sorry if anybody thinks that this college has been established so as to show discrimination between Hindus and Muslims. The main reason behind the establishment of this institution was the wretched dependence of the Muslims, which had been debasing their position day after day. Their religious fanaticism did not let them avail the educational facilities provided by the government schools and colleges. It was, therefore, deemed necessary to make some special arrangement for their education. Suppose, for example, there are two brothers, one of whom is quite hale and hearty but the other is diseased. Thus, it is the duty of all the brothers to take care of their ailing brother. This was the very idea that goaded me to establish the Mohammedan Anglo-Oriental College. But I am pleased to say that both the brothers get the same education in this College.

Sir Syed started the epoch making Aligarh Movement for the restoration of the socio-cultural security and regeneration of the Indian Muslims. Intellectual bankruptcy in the Muslim community necessitated the exigency of English education for his community. He urged the Muslims to accept modern scientific English education like their Hindu counterpart. He strongly believed that “skepticism and anti-religious ideas could be effectively countered if Muslim youths were taught modern sciences and English language along with Arabic and Islamic studies.” Deeply influenced by the two periodicals of London, *Tatler* and *The Spectator* by Addison and Steele, he initiated the publication of the journal titled *Tahzib-al-Akhlaq* for the reformation of Muslim Society. Through the writings in this journal, Sir Syed started spreading his ideals, ideas, and propagating beliefs of reason, to vanquish blind faith. He interprets Quran and Hadith with reason going against the grain of orthodox interpretation of Islam. He vehemently fought against the social evils- ignorance, superstitions, and un-Islamic customs- prevalent among Indian Muslims. He wrote against false belief, dogma and prevalent un-Islamic customs of the Muslims and urged them to be equipped with modern scientific knowledge and rational believer in Islam. The socio-cultural and concomitant religious issues dealt with in the journal had lasting impact on the Indian Muslims as Syed Ahmed says:

The purpose and objective of starting this journal is to help Muslims get rid of wrong and superstitious religious beliefs that are an obstruction to the road to progress of the community but also definitely against Islam, and to develop into a healthy, civilized and educated Muslim Community.

(Tehzeeb-ul-Akhlaq)

His writings and articles on Tehzeeb-ul-Akhlaq led to the confrontation with the conservative Muslim clerics within the community and this conflict symbolically represents the conflict between reason and established blind faith. He argued and refuted the traditional belief system and offered reorientation of Islam and traditional culture. Some of them issued fatwa of Kufr against him for his attempt to social reformation. Coincidentally Sir Syed was going to England and the concerned person named Emdad Ali was going to Saudi Arabia to bring fatwa against him. This incident drew the attention of a contemporary Urdu poet, Akbar Ellahibadi who ridiculed the fact that:

“Sudhare Shekh Kabe ko,
Ham Englishtan Dekhenge,
Oh Dekhe Ghar Khuda ko
Ham Khuda ki Shan Dekhenge”

Sir Syed preferred to go to London, instead of Macca to be enlightened by the reason than by blind faith to be able to understand the greatness of God. in the David Lelyveld considered Sir Syed’s journey to London as pilgrimage. Moreover, he also established ‘The Scientific Society’ to translate the important books of scientific knowledge and critical thinking and “published the translation of a small Perso-Arabic treatise on mechanical devices for lifting heavy objects”. He established translation society in 1863 for translating prominent English books of diverse disciplines into Urdu. The establishment of the society served dual purposes, promotion of Urdu as well as propagation and dissemination of the advanced scientific western knowledge among the India Muslims to educate and improve the socio-economic condition of the Muslims. He wrote several books on Islamic history and his books on Sirat-ul. Nabi and Tafsir al Quran are also well acknowledged across the world. Sir Syed also has written many critical essays on various issues and history of Islam like “Essay on the Birth and Childhood of Mohammad (1870)”, “Essay on the Prophecies

Respecting Mohammad” “Essay on Sakki- Sadar and Meraj” (1870) “Essay on Pedigree of Muhammad” “Essay on Holy Koran” (1870), “Essay on the Question whether Islam has been Beneficial or Injurious to Human Society in General”.

In post-1857, the question of the survival of the 20/% minority Muslims in the Hindu majority British-India also came up. There was threat to the assimilation of the Muslim culture with the majoritarian Hindu culture of India and there were every possibilities of merging Muslims into the major Hindu religion. Restoration and preservation of the Islamic culture is another significant concern of Syed Ahmed Khan to connect with roots of the glorious past and have a sense of identity and belonging of the Muslims. He contributed several books on the socio-cultural and political conditions of the Indian Muslims in “The Present State of Indian Politics” Consisting of Speeches and Letters. He realized that without modern scientific education it was not possible to achieve social security of the Muslims. In the *Asar Al Sanadid* (‘The Remnant Signs of Ancient Heroes, 1847, 1854) written in Urdu, he tries to bring out glorious past of Islamic architecture and history in Delhi. The book dwells upon “the buildings in and around Shahjahanabad, the Red Fort, and about the people of the city and their ways”.

Contribution to Urdu Language

Sir Syed was apprehensive of the erosion of the centuries-old Muslim cultural identity when the East India Company took over the power of undivided India from the Mughal Empire. In the post-1857 British India, Sir Syed witnessed Hindi-Urdu controversy and perceived threat to cultural security of Indian Muslims. In the Hindu dominated British-India, Sir Syed also felt the threat to the linguistic heritage of the Muslims' Urdu language which was, next to Persian, second important language used by the Muslim rulers of India. He observed Urdu as the lingua franca of Muslims was at stake and therefore, advocated and promoted Urdu as the symbol of Muslim heritage. Since the decline of the Mughal dynasty, he also persuaded the British to give Urdu extensive official use and patronage. His intellectual friends and colleagues such as Maulvi Abdul Haq and Mohsin-ul-Mulk founded the organisations such as the Urdu Defence Association and the Anjuman Taraqqi-i-Urdu, committed to the promotion of Urdu. He also established 'The Scientific Society' in 1863 to translate the important English books into their vernacular language i.e. Urdu to disseminate scientific knowledge and critical thinking among the Muslims. Sir Syed established Urdu medium schools to for the Muslim's education. Sir Syed also promoted the use of Urdu through his own writings. He wrote several Urdu books on history, socio-cultural- economic-political- religious issues of the contemporary society; some of his writings are Abtale Ghulami (Slavery is against Nature) (1893), Ahkam Ta'am al-kitab (1868), The Ain-i-Akbari (the "Institutes of Akbar mode of governing) (1855), Al Khutbat al Ahmadiya (1870), in reply to Muir's "Life of Mahomet", Aldua Wal Istajaba (1892), Asbabe Baghavate Hind (1858), Haqeeqat us Sahar (1910), Ik Nadaan Khuda Parast aur dana dunyadar ki kahani, Izalatul Ghain An Zulqurnain (1889) , Khalaqal insaan ali mafil quran(1891), Safar nama Musafiran e London, (1869), Safar nama Punjab (1884), Sarkashi Zila Bijonour (1858), Urdu, Sirat-i-Faridiya, (1896) etc.

With the end of the Mughal Empire, the English people came to India with various purposes like trade and political purpose etc. Besides trades, several Christians came with missionary zeal to impose their religion alongside spreading falsehood and propagation against Islamic culture. Sir Syed started to write back to the misconception, misperception, and distortion, misrepresentation of and propagation against Islam and its culture in the western writers' Orientalism/ missionary preaching. He took up his pen to retort to the false propagation of Islam by Christian missionaries. The falsehood and slandering attack on the Prophet (PBUH) in William Muir's Life of Mahomet (1861) prompted Sir Syed to visit England in search of the

materials of the library of William Muir. In reply to William Muir's book against the Prophet (PBUH), Sir Syed Ahmed refuted the misunderstanding, misperception, and false representation of the preaching of the missionaries in Kutubidia Ahmedia (1870). Later, with his convincing reply William Muir accepted his faults.

Cultural Legacy:

Sir Syed strives to retain the Cultural identity of Muslims by bridging the gap between Indian Muslims and English, and bringing about the cultural synthesis among the different communities in India. Sir Syed's significant contribution towards promotion of communal harmony deserves special mention. He asserts that "We (Hindus and Muslims) eat the same crop, drink water from the same rivers and breath the same air. As a matter of fact Hindus and Muslims are the two eyes of the beautiful bride that is Hindustan. Weakness of any one of them will spoil the beauty of the bride (dulhan)". He established cross-cultural understanding among different communities of the world. He strived to bring Muslims and Christians closer and his commentaries on the Bible testified to the fact. When communal riots were a commonplace phenomenon in India, he vehemently worked for the peaceful coexistence of the Hindus and Muslims in India as he considered Hindu and Muslim to be "the two eyes of a beautiful bride". Moreover, Sir Syed spread the words of harmony among the Muslims and had a clear vision about the two major sects of Islam i.e. Shia and Sunni. He adhered to the belief that "You with your beliefs and I with mine" and did never intervene in the belief systems of others. In boarding house of Mohammadan Anglo Oriental College, he strictly dissuaded to discuss about the religious differences among the students, rather emphasized on the political unity of the Muslims. There is prevailing harmony among the both the sects of the community inside the campus and they offer prayers at the same mosque. His respect for the follower of the different sects is manifested in the fact that in the entire South Asia, Aligarh Muslim University has two distinct theology departments of both the sects of the community. When the world-wide sectarian violence and intolerance supposed to be the cause of the political as well as social downfall of the Muslims reaches its peak, Mujahid Mughal, one of the scholars from AMU, said that "The kind of tolerance practiced here is, possibly, unparalleled in the world with green, white and black caps shining together, five times a day." Sir Syed Mosque, the Grand Mosque of Aligarh Muslim University, has a lot to say to those who have eyes and ears. However, in the midst of this chaos, Sir Syed Mosque at the Aligarh Muslim University (AMU) is a ray of hope. Adjacent to the historical Stretchy Hall, Sir Syed Mosque is still carrying the Muslim identity and the mosques naturally draws attention of the visitor immediately after entering the main academic building offering striking view for the onlookers. The Mosque has been a centre of tourist attraction as well, since people belonging to all faiths and all walks of life from all over the world visit it. This mosque in its architectural beauty is believed to be imitation of Jama Mosque of Delhi and the Mughal Badshahi Mosque of Lahore.

Cultural Identity/ Legacy of Aligarh Muslim University

Moreover, The Aligarh Muslim University is still a Movement for the Indian Muslims and for the Muslims of the world as it has been preserving and promoting the cultural heritage of Muslims. The cultural tradition of the Muslims started by Sir Syed Ahmed Khan is still prevalent in the campus of Aligarh Muslim University. Besides other Islamic religious festivals, Ali Day and Muharram are officially celebrated with grandeur in the university. In Aligarh Muslim University, besides the teaching of theology, disseminating and promoting the knowledge of English, modern science and other scientific subjects are taught. The grand mosque of the college was built adjacent to the central Academic Building of Mohammadan Anglo Oriental College named the Sir Syed mosque. Thus, the existence of the mosque and academic building symbolically represents the juxtaposition of the religion and modern science side by side. The campus is full of innumerable mosques in every nook and corner of the University, and the cultural attire of the Muslims like sherwani, topi, burqa worn by the students of Aligarh Muslim University. The cultural attire of the Muslims, itself is a distinguished mark of AMU status as the university provides the Shewani and Burqa to the students. There is a distinct theology department in the university and teaching of theology is compulsory in the university. Besides the Department of Islamic Studies and Department of Arabic, and Centre for Quranic Studies widely known for their contribution in scholarship across the world, Z. H. College of Engineering and Technology, Jawaharlal Nehru Medical College bringing laurels to the university. Moreover the buildings in the campus, whether Sir Syed Hall, Begum Sultan Jahan Manzil or the Maulana Azad Library, second largest Library in Asia, clearly bear the imprints of the medieval Islamic architecture and culture of the Muslims. A.R. Kidwai in "The Crystal Globe: Aligarh Muslim University and the Indian Muslim Fiction" states that how varied facets of "Aligarh Muslim University has impacted on shaping the Indian Muslims' mind in the late 19th and 20th Century. Few Educational institutes can vie with Aligarh Muslim University for being prominent in the intellectual and cultural history of a community" (Kidwai 160).

Sir Syed infused the sense of identity among the Muslims by founding Mohammadan Anglo Oriental College (1875) which later became Aligarh Muslim University. The very existence of "Mohammadan" Anglo Oriental College/ Aligarh "Muslims" University is manifestation of the cultural identity of Indian Muslims. He made the Muslims realize their distinct culture and religion in the Hindu-dominated Indian society. Even after the

Catastrophe of Post -1947, the University is still serving as the premier educational hub for the Muslims in the entire country. The Aligarh Muslim University has been paying tribute to Sir Syed Ahmed Khan by retaining his ideals intact in the 21st century.

The university tarana (anthem of AMU) truly manifests the inherent characteristics of Aligarh Muslim University:

Jo abr yahañ se utthega, wo sarey jahañ par barsega

Har jooy-e-rawaah par barsega, har koh-e-garaah par barsega

Khud apne chaman par barsega, gairon ke chaman par barsega

Har shahr-e-tarab par garjega, har qasr-e-tarab par kadkega

Ye abr hamesha barsa hai, ye abr hamesha barsega

The Aligarh Muslim University is serving for the cause of the advancement of learning keeping the students' Islamic and cultural identity intact. Today Alumni of Sir Syed's institution is "spread over 92 countries and perhaps this is the only University of India whose students are found in every part of the world". Students from Muslim World, particularly Iraq, Iran, Syria, Yemen, Egypt, Jordan, South East Asian countries like Thailand, Indonesia, And Brazil, African Countries has been studying in this prestigious modern Muslim Institute. The students of Aligarh Muslim University are called Alig and they proudly carry their identity all over the world. Every year Sir Syed Day is celebrated on 17th October with grandeur by AMU Alumni Association across the world.

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